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Research Roundup: Homework — For Better or for Worse

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It's an interesting phenomenon. Ask a preschooler to name one thing that they most look forward to when they move on to grade school and you're likely to hear "getting homework" somewhere toward the top of the list. Ask a student in middle school to list the things they like most about school and the response is likely to be "lunch, recess, and not getting homework." Pose the question to a high school student, and homework is rarely mentioned. Why the difference in responses? What does the research tell us about homework at different times in a student's educational career? And what should parents and educators do to ensure that homework is a positive and productive ingredient in a child's school experience?

In search of a definition

Look for a definition of the word "homework" and you're likely to find descriptions that include:

- preparatory school work done outside school (especially at home)
- work that is planned or approved by the teacher but that is to be completed by the student outside of the regular classroom
- work assigned to students that is to be completed while not directly supervised by the teacher

Interestingly, when I did a cursory search for definitions online, none of the sources mentioned anything about parents. Now think for a moment about the conversation that takes place in virtually every household where parents and school-age children cohabitate: "How was your day in school?" "How did you do on your test?" and "What do you have for homework?". Why is it that parents are conspicuously omitted from this definition? Is it because they have no role in the homework process? Read on.

The research says ...

As might be expected, there is no definitive body of knowledge about the benefits of homework, how much is enough (or too much), how frequently it should be assigned, and for which students and in what subject areas it is most helpful. There is, however, a strong literature to suggest that homework serves a number of different purposes:

- **Practice:** rehearse and re-learn skills and information taught in class
- **Preparation:** introduce material that will be formally taught in future lessons
- **Extension:** apply already learned skills to new problems and situations
- **Integration:** use many different skills to complete a single task (i.e. book report, science project)

The homework debate

Here are some of the plusses and pitfalls to homework that are derived from current research:

Plusses:

- There is, over time, a powerful positive link between homework and academic achievement.
- Homework is an effective tool for teaching students to work independently.
- Well-designed homework encourages good study habits (whether student initiated or modeled by teachers and parents).

- Homework can effectively prepare students to identify and use resources such as the library, Internet, research texts and other informational sources.
- Homework can strengthen school-home communication.
- Doing homework is a highly cost effective way to have students revisit, remember and understand material taught in school and prepare for the next day's lesson.
- Doing homework can impress upon students that learning can (and should) take place outside the classroom.
- Engaging in homework can help students learn and practice organization and time management skills, and serve to create important early linkages between adults in the home and school personnel.

Pitfalls:

- Homework has shown to provide different benefits at different stages in school, and a mismatch in homework assigned and student readiness can result in frustration and a student's reluctance to keep trying.
- Most homework should not be graded, nor should it be viewed as a test; doing so discourages students to reflect upon their work and evaluate their understanding of material taught in class.
- It is unfair to students to use material as a vehicle to teach new skills.
- Despite the temptation, homework should not be assigned as a punishment.
- Assigning too much homework may result in disinterest and fatigue; students overburdened with homework assignments will also begin to view their assignments as punitive and will do what they can to either avoid doing it, and yes, even cheat, to get it done.

Some guidelines

It should be clear by this point that homework can be an effective way for students to improve their learning and for parents and educators to work cooperatively in support of a student's progress. Here are some informal homework guidelines for students throughout the grades:

For young children (K-Grade 2):

- Homework is most effective when it does not exceed 20 - 30 minutes per day.
- The benefits of homework may not be immediately apparent; it does, however, set the right tone for students to reflect on their school day and begin to develop good study habits.

For students in grades 3 to 6:

- Students can benefit from 30 - 60 minutes of homework per day.
- Ideally, homework should focus on providing opportunities for practicing newly learned skills and applying concepts in a way that helps parents and teachers isolate problems and provide individualized instruction and support.

For junior and senior high school students:

- There is no recommended timeframe for homework, and it is not unusual for students to spend as long as 2 ½ hours or more per day on after school assignments.
- The focus of assignments should be on building upon skills, taking ownership of new ideas, and helping students incorporate new information into their repertoire of general knowledge.

Recommendations for parents (and teachers)

It is important to consider that the effectiveness of different types of homework will vary according to a student's age and ability, and that more time spent on homework does not necessarily lead to higher achievement. That said, here is a list of recommended practices that can help to make homework more productive (and maybe even fun?) for students, parents and educators:

- **Be consistent:** Try to determine your child's regular pattern of homework so it can be easily incorporated into a daily routine. Offer assistance without being intrusive. Remember whose work it is, and allow your child the opportunity to take charge.
- **Define expectations:** Teachers need to let students know if/when homework will be assigned, collected, reviewed, or graded, and how they expect parents to support the completion of homework assignments. Parents need to know, in advance, if/when signatures are required, and need to have easy and ongoing access to teachers when questions and problems arise.
- **Avoid busy work:** There's nothing worse than asking a child complete 50 math problem when 10 will do the trick. Parents and teachers should be vigilant to ensure that assignments are interesting, challenging, and varied in format.
- **Keep an eye on the clock:** More is not better when it comes to homework. Be sure to spread the burden of homework over time, and be sensitive to the set up and clean up time that is often needed for students to complete their work. Remember also that homework is likely to be assigned in a number of classes, so efforts to coordinate a calendar of demands would be very helpful. Parents can be very helpful by assisting their child to anticipate challenges with scheduling (i.e. many assignments due at once, juggling extra-curricular activities) and identifying the resources and possible accommodations needed to complete assignments.
- **Guarantee success:** Homework should be designed so students can complete most (if not all) of the tasks successfully. And in every instance, their efforts should be acknowledged (even when they struggle and make mistakes).
- **Provide feedback:** Homework without feedback will quickly be perceived by students as meaningless and unnecessary. Providing feedback that is explicit and well-targeted has been shown to improve overall student performance.

Recommended reading and resources

For more information about this topic, check out the following Web resources:

Homework Tips for Parents

www.ed.gov/parents/academic/involve/homework/part.html

Homework 101

www.id.org/news/0804news/0804feature2.cfm

Helping With Homework: A Parent's Guide to Big6 Information Problem-Solving

www.big6.com/showarticle.php?id=308

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS)

www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/tipsmain.htm

The Great Homework Debate Teacher to Teacher: Issues Effecting the Classroom Teacher

www.aft.org/teachers/t2t/0204.htm

Increasing Student Engagement and Motivation: From Time-on-Task to Homework

www.nwrel.org/request/oct00/textonly.html

The Homework Dilemma

www.suite101.com/lesson.cfm/17914/1160/3

Research Shows Homework Does Boost Academic Achievement

www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1998/03/980304073520.htm

Homework Research and Policy: A review of the Literature

Parental Involvement in Homework: A Review of Current Research